Meeting Minutes
35E MnPASS Extension Study – Steering Committee Meeting Date: 5/14/2014
Time: 9:30 am

## Attendees:

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## Overview:

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This was a meeting to give a status update on the 35E MnPASS Extension Study and get feedback on the Concept Development technical analysis, findings and recommendations.

## Agenda:

1. Introductions and Overview
2. Community Dialogues Update
3. Concept Development – Technical Findings and Recommendations
4. Feedback on Concept Development - Technical Findings and Recommendations
5. Land Use & Transit Enhancement Update

## Discussion:

Brad Larsen opened the meeting by giving a brief overview of the purpose of the study. The purpose of the study is to develop and evaluate conceptual options for extending the MnPASS managed lanes on I-35E between Little Canada Road and CR 96, as well as to identify and evaluate methods for improving bus transit and carpool use in the MnPASS lanes on I-35E. The results of the study will determine if there is a feasible, viable option to construct the managed lanes in the 2016 construction season. The project has the potential to be funded if it can be done in 2016 in coordination with the Goose Lake Bridge and pavement project scheduled to begin in 2015 and be completed in 2016.

The study is nearing completion on two of its three critical elements - the Concept Development element and the Community Dialogue element. The third element, Land Use & Transit Enhancement, will be complete in the fall of 2014. MnDOT would like come to a decision at the end of May on whether or not there is a feasible concept for this corridor in order to begin the environmental process. This would be necessary to get the project ready for construction in 2016.

Next Lee Munnich from the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School introduced the Community Dialogues portion of meeting. Lee explained that the purpose of this study component is to engage the corridor users and stakeholders and get feedback on the different concept options. The dialogues are engaging three groups: the communities and businesses in the area, the professional drivers that use the corridor, and the general public that use the corridor. Lee then turned the presentation over to Emily Saunoi-Sandgren to give an update on the dialogue sessions.

Emily began by saying that in addition to giving an update on the dialogue sessions, she would also share with the group the materials that the participants in the community dialogue sessions received. The Community Dialogue Sessions are structured like a focus group with 12-15 people. An agenda for a Community Dialogue Sessions was distributed to the group. Emily would begin the sessions by giving participants a baseline understanding of what a MnPASS lane. Based on the sessions she has done, Emily indicated that there is a lack of knowledge and in some cases misinformed ideas about what MnPASS is. After providing general information on what MnPASS is, Emily would then show participants a map of the corridor to orient them to the study area. On her corridor map, there are three dots indicating key

project components. Emily would also show participants aerial images of the corridor as well as images of the corridor from the viewpoint of a driver. All of the images are from the northbound 35E viewpoint but they would be the same in the southbound direction. A committee member asked what the yellow line in the drawings shows. Emily explained that that was a result of taking a snapshot from Google Earth, and it does not have significance to this project. She would then explain the three concept options to the participants. She would do this by showing the driver viewpoint visuals and also figures shown from above. Emily then showed a slide with different examples of questions that could be discussed at the dialogue sessions. These questions are presented in a way that that participants can discuss with each other and express any concerns they may have.

Emily then gave a status update on what has been completed for this aspect of the study. She has completed two dialogue sessions, but has scheduled four. For the first session, no one RSVP'd, but Emily's group met at the location in case a participant showed up. Two participants showed up, and were able to discuss the study with Emily's group. These were concerned members of the general public. There was a second general user session, and this session had 13 participants. These participants had a minimal understanding of MnPASS, so the main focus of that session was general information on what MnPASS is. Of the two professional driver dialogue sessions, only one participant showed up at the first session, and three participants showed up at the second. These participants were directors of transportation for non-profit transit organizations and were concerned with how this would affect their employees. Safety and continuity were the most important factors to this group. These participants indicated that the MnPASS without a gap would make the most sense from this standpoint. They found the shoulder option scary since it would mean drivers would have to make extra merges. Emily indicated that there has been additional interest from professional drivers who were not able to make the dialogue sessions and she is scheduling one on one interviews in order to meet with them. She will also be scheduling one on one interviews with the general user group.

Next Emily will be scheduling meetings with the community and business leaders. A committee member asked if all of the meetings that Emily discussed scheduling would occur before there are decisions made. Emily said there is a sense of urgency to have the meetings before any decisions are made since the purpose of having the meetings is to influence the decisions. Another committee member asked about the limited number of participants and limited feedback and how this will be used to form a consensus on the public's perspective. Emily said that it was very difficult to get the public to attend the dialogue sessions. Lee indicated that it would be helpful for committee members to provide specific names of people to contact to engage in the dialogue sessions. Another committee member provided Emily with the name of a community and business leader that would be a good person to engage. Emily indicated that although her group has contacted around 17,000 people in the corridor, and often more than one time for each, there has not been success in getting people to participate. She said generally there is very little interest in the study, and this could be due to the lack of knowledge of what MnPASS is. There is a possibility that once the MnPASS lane up to Little Canada Road is in place, more people of the community will be interested in the concept. A committee member indicated that it is likely that if there was large opposition to the concept, more participants would show up to the dialogue sessions.

Emily was interested in getting the dialogue session participants' feedback on the No Build versus MnPASS scenarios. The feedback she has received from the general users' perspective is that something must be done, and they believe the best scenario would be to increase capacity in the area. This was the idea before they had much understanding of MnPASS and why MnPASS is the only option for the corridor at this time. Once they had an understanding of MnPASS, they were more open to the idea. The participants from the professional drivers group were very supportive of MnPASS, but these participants only represented non-profit transit organizations. This may not be the case for freight haulers. Brad indicated that this was a unique approach to community involvement, but it performed similarly to the traditional style of outreach. Emily said the main aspect of the involvement is to meet the people where they are at and make sure they reach a level of understanding before getting too far into the details of the different options. A committee member noted that Minnesotans are not used to seeing toll roads and the concept of paying more for the convenience of a reliable trip, so this is something that must be overcome. Another participant asked if the participants that Emily spoke with had an understanding of the MnPASS lanes that are in place elsewhere. Emily indicated that most of the participants did not have much experience driving west of St. Paul and were not aware that there was MnPASS in place.

Next, Nick Thompson of Parsons Brinckerhoff introduced the Concept Development portion of the meeting. He briefly discussed the current conditions of the corridor while showing an aerial of 35E in this area. He noted that the existing conditions on 35E are much worse south of 694. He then showed the corridor growth forecast results, which can be found in the meeting slideshow. These results say the corridor will continue to expand. The communities are growing in this area, and the data indicates it is a good candidate for a MnPASS lane to assist in corridor mobility. Nick showed a graph showing trip time reliability, and it indicated that during some times of day drivers can experience as much as a 10 minute swing in travel time. This means drivers have to plan for the worst case scenario. MnPASS pricing flexibility would ensure that drivers would have an option for a reliable trip. Nick then did a quick overview of the three concepts. Each concept is compared to the No Build scenario.

Next, the basis for recommendation was discussed. The three key components are the traffic analysis, design and operational considerations, and the stakeholder considerations. These will all be taken into account to form the final recommendation. PB's recommendation will be based strictly on the technical design and operational consideration as well as the traffic analysis, since we are just beginning to get the stakeholder information. Nick showed a table giving the criteria against which the three options performed differently. PB also handed out the complete evaluation table that includes all 23 evaluation criteria. Based on this table, the Gap and No Gap scenarios performed similarly and better than the MnPASS on shoulder option. Because of this, it was reasonable to rule out the MnPASS on shoulder option for the more detailed traffic analysis.

A committee member asked what the difference in cost is due to. Nick explained that the significantly higher cost of the MnPASS on Shoulder option is due to the technology required and the need to rebuild the shoulder and median barrier for the Shoulder option. The design speed for the shoulder option would also require additional safety elements which would also add cost.

Nick then walked the group through the traffic analysis steps. PB used forecasted traffic volumes for year 2030 to model MnPASS With and Without a Gap options in 2030. PB then utilized the 2030 results to select one concept for year 2017 analysis. From this PB chose to look at the MnPASS Without a Gap option in detail. This option was then compared with the No Build scenario. Nick then gave a quick summary on the traffic analysis process, which can be found in the meeting slides. An important point that was made was the need to analyze how much faith can be put in the traffic data for 2030. Because of this the traffic data analysis can be just one of the data inputs.

Next the key findings from the traffic analysis were discussed. First the No Build scenario had worse conditions than today's, which coincides with the fact that the communities in the area continue to grow. The With and Without a gap concepts show northbound problems as the MnPASS lane ends north of CR 96. They would both perform at a lower level of service than the No Build scenario. A committee member asked why this would be the case. Nick explained that the conditions that exist today at CR E would occur at CR 96. This would be due to the bottleneck that occurs by having the MnPASS lane move back into general purpose lanes at the same time that vehicles are merging on from CR 96. There are not enough vehicles that exit at CR 96 to alleviate this congestion. Lee commented that there are more people moving at lower speeds and there would be lower reliability in the two MnPASS scenarios ending at CR96. Another committee member commented that although there is a lot of traffic exiting at CR 96, there is a large quantity entering at CR 96 as well. This affects the area north of CR E. The modeling shows that the conditions are slightly better at CR E, but it has been debated that the problems would spill back to CR E. Nick also noted that MnPASS drivers may also be affected at that point.

Next Nick showed charts showing Average Peak Hour Speed for the No Build general purpose lanes, Without a Gap MnPASS lane, and Without a Gap general purpose lanes. In general, the MnPASS lane continued to have higher speeds and the general purposes performed the same and in some cases better than the No Build scenario. The key conclusions from the traffic analysis were: there is a need to continue the MnPASS lanes north of Little Canada Road, there are operational issues with ending the managed lane at CR 96, and a hybrid option would be recommended to produce a better return on investment.

Peter Muehlbach then introduced the Hybrid Option that was mentioned in the Technical Recommendation. In the northbound direction, there would be a MnPASS lane With a Gap through the 35E/694 Commons and the lane would extend north to CR J. In the southbound direction, the MnPASS lane would start at Goose Lake Road (south of CR 96) and have no gap in the Commons. This would operate as a Pilot Test through the Commons for two years, and operational adjustments would be possible based on test results. In the future phase of this option, the MnPASS lanes would extend to CR 14 when there is a future funding and construction opportunity. Peter then walked the group through slides illustrating this hybrid option. The future phase of extending the MnPASS lane to CR 14 is a large investment, but MnPASS lanes perform better when they are not short segments of lane.

Peter then went in to more detail on the Pilot Test aspect of the Hybrid recommendation. The Pilot Test would evaluate the performance of the With a Gap (northbound) and Without a Gap (southbound)

scenarios. The Test allows for modifications to operations based on real world results. Peter also indicated other areas that have done HOT Lane Pilot Tests. A committee member indicated that we have to be careful how we characterize the test. We don't want people to think that after two years if the Gap option works in the northbound direction, it will automatically work in the southbound direction. Another committee member asked why the southbound MnPASS lane doesn't start until after CR 96. Nick explained that the southbound traffic problems are not as problematic as northbound, and it would be better to invest that money into extending further in the northbound direction. Peter once again indicated that the Pilot Test gives the opportunity to make changes to the system. It can be studied in detail in order to make small tweaks to the system. Different elements of the system can be tested based on the conditions in the corridor.

Peter then walked the group through slides detailing the north and southbound conditions separately. This explained the reasoning behind the recommendations for each direction on 35E. A committee member asked why there is a higher volume of traffic in the AM peak compared with the PM peak. Nick indicated that this is due to having more spaced out trips in the evening. A committee member indicated that the With and Without a Gap options are similar and it makes sense to test these scenarios to see if the modeling is accurate. They said that it is important to inform the public that this is really the only opportunity for a long time to bring capacity and mobility improvements to the corridor. It will be a long time until there is more investment in mobility or pavement rehab in this area.

Peter then discussed the increase in capacity that the hybrid option brings. He reminded the group that during off peak times the MnPASS lanes become general purpose lanes. He also gave an example of travel time reliability with this hybrid option, which can be found in the meeting slides. Finally he showed the cost of the different options. The Hybrid option would cost more. The estimate for the hybrid is approximately $18 million. This would be due to the longer northbound managed lane to CR J. This number does not take into account the potential right of way costs. Right of way may be needed for water treatment, it is not a large cost but could be a risk to the schedule. Peter also discussed the schedule of the two phases (initial phase and future phase ending at CR 14). A committee member asked how much is currently funded for the project. Brad indicated that MnDOT has currently budgeted $14 million for the project. This is lower than the $18 million Hybrid option estimate. MnDOT must consider if the extra funding would be available. This has not been determined at this time. If the $14 million is not used on this project, there is no specific project or corridor determined yet that it will go to. Dale Gade from MnDOT is doing a high level scoping exercise on the project. The biggest issue is the delivery timelines for the project. The project is on the fast track because the Right of Way Office estimates that Right of Way Acquisition will take 18 months to complete. This is a tight schedule with the year 2016 timeframe. The environmental documentation is another item that must be started as soon as possible in order to make the 2016 deadline. These are all risk factors. There is also the risk to schedule the Transportation Policy Plan and the TIP Amendment. A committee member asked what the risk would be to build the corridor to design standards. Peter indicated that this cost is not known at this time. MnDOT plans to meet with both Met Council and FHWA before the end of the month when a decision will be made.

Peter then opened the meeting up for discussion and feedback on the concept development, technical findings, and recommendations. A committee member indicated that they want the project to proceed. They said that there are many commuters in the corridor and we would like those commuters to be happy and to have more time in their communities and not stuck in congestion. Another committee member indicated that they like the Hybrid option because of the many benefits associated with it. Another committee member asked what the opportunity is to extend the MnPASS lane to CR 14. The group indicated that it is an issue of needs versus funding. MnDOT does not anticipate a lot of funding in the future, and does not foresee additional funds for more improvements in this corridor under current funding projections. The committee member then asked if there are any physical barriers limiting the expansion. Peter indicated that there is a lot of room between CR J and CR 14 and there is not much risk of any physical barriers to the expansion. The biggest barrier in the area is the Goose Lake Bridge, and that is now funded to be widened in 2015-2016. Another committee member asked if there will be more money for a managed lane in the future if this project does not go through. MnDOT indicated that there is nothing currently in the plan for additional money in this corridor for managed lanes. Another committee member asked if there are other considerations that can be looked at during the Pilot Test Period. This would be possible. Another committee member indicated that the label of Test Period gives a different public perception. Another committee member said that in other places that this has been done, the public has not been tuned into the fact that it is a Test Period. The Test Period aspect is more important in the legislative groups. The group discussed the risk of this being an issue and if the public will sense the difference between the northbound and southbound directions. The general feeling of the group was that the public will not sense those differences.

Another committee member said that the hybrid option gives the best "bang for our buck". People naturally would want additional capacity through the area, but would not necessarily want to pay for it. They said that the steering committee members need to explain the benefits of the managed lane to their communities. There is currently opposition to the idea and there is not overwhelming support. We don't have a sense of how people will react to the idea of taking away a portion of the general purpose lane for MnPASS. People may react poorly at first but be accepting once it is in place and working. It can be tested with the Pilot Test aspect and see how it performs. MnDOT could meet with some of the groups in the area to get a feel for the acceptance of the concept. This probably won't occur before the end of the month, however. Another committee member asked if we look at the risk of doing nothing. This has been looked at, and the understanding is that not doing anything at this point means we don't have any idea of when in the future investment in the area can be done. It will not become easier or less expensive to construct over time and there will be less public acceptance for the Without a Gap through the commons. This project also has the opportunity to improve the functionality of the MnPASS project south of Little Canada Road. Another committee member suggested that it would be a good idea to leverage the existing expenditures instead of trying to come up with something new in the future.

MnDOT also indicated that it would be rare to do this as a standalone project. Projects that address congestion are often done with a preservation project –like bridge or pavement replacement. Another committee member asked how this would work with the Rush Line. A Rush Line representative indicated

that it works well with the Rush Line, and the biggest concern is the tight timeline. Currently the Rush Line alternatives would end at CR 96. The Hybrid option would continue the transit benefits further north. Brad indicated that there is little transit advantage to use the MnPASS lane for short distances since it would be easier to just use the shoulder. The Hybrid option would have a higher transit advantage to travel further north.

Finally, Lynne Introduced the Land Use and Transit Enhancement Portion of the meeting. Mary Vogel, from the University of Minnesota, is looking at how communities are affected by the project. This focuses on the ability for communities to access the transit and carpooling locations. She is looking at the lessons learned and what lessons can be shared across the communities. She is currently scheduling meetings with the communities to determine what does and doesn't work.

Brad closed the meeting by informing the group that he will be sending out all the information from the meeting to the group and solicit their final comments and feedback prior to MnDOT making a decision at the end of the month. After a decision is made on whether or not to proceed with a project, Brad will send out information about the decision to the Steering Committee and see if the group is interested in meeting again during the summer. Regardless of whether the group meets this summer, one more meeting will be held in late September or early October to consider the results of the Land Use and Transit Enhancement component.